COUNCIL on FOREIGN RELATIONS

The United States Bars Christian, Not Muslim, Refugees From Syria

Blog Post *by* Elliott Abrams

September 9, 2016

The title of this blog post--The United States Bars Christian, Not Muslim, Refugees From Syria--will strike many readers as ridiculous.

But the numbers tell a different story: The United States has accepted 10,801 Syrian refugees, of whom 56 are Christian. Not 56 percent; 56 total, out of 10,801. That is to say, one half of one percent. The BBC says that ten percent of all Syrians are Christian, which would mean 2.2 million Christians. It is quite obvious, and President Obama and Secretary Kerry have acknowledged it, that Middle Eastern Christians are an especially persecuted group.

So how is it that one half of one percent of the Syrian refugees we've admitted are Christian, or 56, instead of about 1,000 out of 10,801--or far more, given that they certainly meet the legal definition? The definition: someone who "is located outside of the United States; Is of special humanitarian concern to the United States; Demonstrates that they were persecuted or fear persecution due to race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group." Somewhere between a half million and a million Syrian Christians have fled Syria, and the United States has accepted 56. Why?

"This is de facto discrimination and a gross injustice," Nina Shea, who is director of the Hudson Institute's Center for Religious Freedom, told Fox News. Fox notes another theory: that the United States takes refugee referrals from the UN refugee

camps in Jordan and there are no Christians there. Here's the Fox excerpt:

"Experts say another reason for the lack of Christians in the make-up of the refugees is the make-up of the camps. Christians in the main United Nations refugee camp in Jordan are subject to persecution, they say, and so flee the camps, meaning they are not included in the refugees referred to the U.S. by the U.N.

"The Christians don't reside in those camps because it is too dangerous," Shea said. "They are preyed upon by other residents from the Sunni community and there is infiltration by ISIS and criminal gangs."
"They are raped, abducted into slavery and they are abducted for ransom. It is extremely dangerous, there is not a single Christian in the Jordanian camps for Syrian refugees," Shea said.
"

The solution would be to allow Christians, and other religious minorities, to apply directly for refugee status--not through the UN. Senator Tom Cotton has introduced legislation doing just that. As his web site explains,

"Senator Tom Cotton (R-Arkansas) today [March 17, 2016] introduced the Religious Persecution Relief Act, legislation that would grant religious minorities fleeing persecution at the hands of ISIS and other groups in Syria priority status so they can apply directly to the U.S. resettlement program. The bill will also set aside 10,000 resettlement slots annually that must be devoted to Syrian religious minorities. Overall, the bill will allow Syrian religious minorities, who fear registration with the U.N. refugee agency, to circumvent the U.N. process and it will fast-track the U.S. review process that confirms they are victims of genocide and persecution."

Is the title of this blog an overstatement, suggesting that the United States "bars" Christian refugees from Syria? Sure, in that we do not and could not legally ban Christian refugees any more than we could or should bar Muslim refugees. But when you have been running a refugee program for years, and you have accepted 10,612 Sunni refugees and 56 Christians, and it is obvious why and obvious how to fix it, and nothing is done to fix it, well, the results speak more loudly than speeches, laws, intentions, or excuses. In effect we make it almost impossible for Christian refugees to get here.

So I'll stick with that title. And I agree with Nina Shea: "This is de facto discrimination and a gross injustice." Hats off to Senator Cotton for seeing it for what it is, and suggesting a viable solution. His bill would bring this shameful practice to an end and save the lives of many Syrian Christians.

The Danger to Scholars

Blog Post *by* Elliott Abrams

September 8, 2016

I'm a proud co-signer of an open letter defending some of America's most impressive scholars against Middle Eastern dictators who are trying to keep them out and shut them up. The title is "Open letter on the hostility of Middle Eastern governments and media to foreign researchers and journalists," and it can be found here (with a full list of signers) and below.

The letter was in part a reaction to the vicious attacks by the Erdogan government in Turkey against Henri Barkey, a distinguished scholar of Turkey who is director of the Middle East Program at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. Media

outlets in Turkey that support Erdogan have alleged that Barkey is a CIA agent who arranged and supported the recent coup attempt. There are plenty of other recent examples of such attacks, and the letter mentions the refusal of the Sisi government in Egypt to permit entry into that country of Michele Dunne. Dunne, an Egypt expert who is a former U.S. official (a career diplomat who also served in the NSC) and now a researcher at the Carnegie Endowment, was invited to a conference in Cairo by the Egyptian Council for Foreign Affairs--but prevented from attending by government agents at the airport. The Italian graduate student Giulio Regeni was killed in Egypt in January of this year. Nine years ago Haleh Esfandiari, the Woodrow Wilson Center's former Middle East director, was arrested in Tehran and jailed in solitary confinement in Evin Prison for 105 days. Anyone who thought that kind of attack on scholars was limited to a tyranny like Iran has been proved wrong now in Turkey and Egypt.

Note also these lines in the letter: "The official American reaction to these abuses in the past has been much too timid. As American citizens, we have often found it embarrassing." Quite right.

"OPEN LETTER ON THE HOSTILITY OF MIDDLE EASTERN GOVERNMENTS AND MEDIA TO FOREIGN RESEARCHERS AND JOURNALISTS

The undersigned individuals have all worked or lived in the Middle East, as scholars, academics, journalists, or members of non-governmental organizations. We are American citizens. Our work is a testimony to our deep appreciation for the rich history, culture, and politics of the modern Middle East. We believe in the need to study the governments and

peoples of this pivotal region and their complex relations with the United States objectively and unapologetically. Many of us have spent most of our careers trying to foster better understanding between the two worlds in which we live and work.

This is why we find the recent case of Henri J. Barkey, an American scholar of modern Turkey, particularly alarming. Turkish media outlets have alleged that Barkey, who is the director of the Middle East Program at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, worked with the CIA in launching the plot to overthrow the Turkish government by force. The failed coup was a shocking, traumatic, and violent event that took the lives of 240 Turks. The authorities in Ankara have the responsibility to bring those involved in the plot to justice. At the time of the coup, Barkey was leading an academic seminar in Istanbul. In the aftermath, the pro-government media singled him out as a foreign bogeyman. His picture was splashed across the front pages of Turkey's newspapers along with banner headlines alleging a connection between Barkey, the CIA, and the failed coup. The slander and outrageous charges grew more ominous with each passing day, in a clear and dangerous campaign of incitement that led to direct threats against Barkey's life. No member of the Turkish media has been held accountable for these lies.

Of course, Turkey is not the only such wrongdoer in the region. Both Iran and Egypt also come to mind. Nine years ago, Haleh Esfandiari, an American scholar and Barkey's predecessor at the Wilson Center was arrested in Tehran and placed in solitary confinement in Evin Prison for 105 days. Esfandiari, who was in her late 60s when she was arrested, is a dual citizen of the United States and Iran. The Iranian government accused her — along with two other academics with dual American and Iranian nationality — of attempting to stage a "soft revolution" by organizing and participating in seminars and conferences. Although Barkey was able to leave Turkey shortly after the coup, he fears a fate similar to Esfandiari's should he return to the country of his birth.

Two years ago, Egyptian authorities denied American scholar and former U.S. government official Michele Dunne entry to the country to participate in a conference organized by the Egyptian Council for Foreign Affairs, a group that is sympathetic to Abdel Fattah el Sisi's government. Egyptian officials offered the bogus excuse that Dunne, did not have a "proper

visa." The real reason was that Dunne, who is an accomplished scholar and former diplomat, has criticized Egypt's deteriorating human rights conditions, particularly since President Sisi came to power in a 2013 military coup.

Younger, less well-known scholars are also at risk. Among the most disturbing of recent cases is that of Giulio Regeni, a 28-year-old-Italian graduate student who was conducting dissertation field research in Egypt. Regeni's family, the Italian government, and a wide range of journalists from a variety of countries believe that Egyptian security agencies tortured and killed him last February.

The official American reaction to these abuses in the past has been much too timid. As American citizens, we have often found it embarrassing. We are expressing our collective indignation, because we are certain that these abuses will continue unless they are challenged publicly. The perpetrators must be held to account. We are urging other scholars, academics, and journalists interested in the Middle East to join us in sending a powerful message to the autocrats of the region and to our own government that enough is enough. Those who first came for Haleh, and imprisoned her, then tried to intimidate Michele and Henri, could come for any one of us when visiting the region.

This protest is about all of us. Even more importantly, it is about our belief that the interests of the United States and these countries are served by the open exchange of people and ideas. Fundamentally important to that exchange are academic and political freedoms for all participants in these dialogues, whether they be local citizens, dual nationals, or U.S. citizens. The recent actions of the pro-government press in Turkey place the exchange of genuine ideas at risk, replacing them with political theater in which we have little interest.

We find the Turkish media's campaign against Henri Barkey, the latest in a series of outrages against academic and political freedom, offensive and personally threatening. We hope that Turkey's leaders and the press that serves them will reverse course otherwise we will find it difficult to engage in any way with the Turkish government, its media outlets, or nominally independent organizations in Washington that work on behalf of Turkey's leadership.

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Obama: See No Evil, See No Enemies

Blog Post *by* Elliott Abrams

September 6, 2016

Two almost simultaneous events in recent days have shed even more light on the Obama administration's treatment of America's enemies.

In Cuba, a Marxist, pro-Russian, anti-American tyranny, the administration pressed hard to abandon decades of policy in exchange for nothing. Human rights conditions there are awful, but the United States did not bargain to end the embargo in exchange for improvements. And since Obama's announcement of a new policy, which was a simple free gift to the Castros, human rights conditions have deteriorated further.

The most recent event was the first commercial flight to Cuba in decades, from Fort Lauderdale to Santa Clara. Santa Clara is the residence of Guillermo Farinas.

Who is he, and why does he matter? He is one of Cuba's bravest human rights advocates, a recipient of the Sakharov Prize from the European Parliament in 2010.

The citation says among other things this:

"A Cuban doctor of psychology, independent journalist and political dissident, Guillermo Fariñas has over the years conducted 23 hunger strikes with the aim of achieving peaceful political change and freedom of expression in Cuba....For his activism, Fariñas has in recent years been threatened with death and confinement in a psychiatric hospital, beaten and hospitalised, and repeatedly arrested and detained, including at the funeral of Oswaldo Payá, another Sakharov Prize laureate and Cuban dissident."

Farinas is in the 48th day of hunger strike right now and was hospitalized on September 5. I write of all this because last week when that Jet Blue flight landed, the Obama administration celebrated it-- but has not said one word about Farinas nor has any American diplomat sought to visit him. (And by the way, that flight was chock full of journalists, as the web site Capitol Hill Cubans points out, and not a single one of them or of the foreign correspondents from Havana who went to Santa Clara sought to visit and speak with him. They were too busy celebrating, it seems. Capitol Hill Cubans quotes Martin Luther King: "in the end, we will remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends.")

Meanwhile, half a world away the Iranian Navy is making a laughingstock of the U.S. Navy, taunting it with small boat actions that endanger our ships, get within about 100 yards of them, and have forced them to take evasive action to avoid collisions. Reuters reported that

"A U.S. Navy coastal patrol ship changed course after a fast-attack craft from Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps came within 100 yards (91 meters) of it in the central Gulf on Sunday, U.S. Defense Department officials said on Tuesday. It was at least the fourth such incident in less than a month. U.S. officials are concerned that these actions by Iran could lead to mistakes."

One U.S. Navy official said "This type of incident would have led NAVCENT to recommend that the State Department deliver a diplomatic message of protest if this interaction had been with a country with which the United States had an official diplomatic relationship." Wrong: the time for a "diplomatic message of protest" is long gone.

Here's an August 25 report from *The New York Times*:

"Iranian naval boats made dangerous maneuvers around United States warships in the Persian Gulf area on at least four occasions this week, Pentagon officials said Thursday, including one episode in which the Americans fired warning shots from a 50-caliber deck gun to prevent a collision.

It was unclear whether the confrontations — one near the Strait of Hormuz on Tuesday and three in the northern Persian Gulf on Wednesday — were deliberate efforts to send a hostile message about American naval activity....
The Iranians came within about 300 yards of the Nitze before veering off, Commander Raines said. Unsure of their intentions, the Nitze changed course several times to try to keep a safe distance from offshore oil rigs in the area.
"We assessed the interaction as unsafe and unprofessional due to the Iranian vessels' not abiding by international law and internationally recognized maritime rules of the road, as well as their high rate of closure of Nitze and disregard of multiple warnings by the ship's whistle and flares," he said.
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And of course all these incidents this summer follow the January capture of ten American sailors.

But the *Times* is dead wrong: it is crystal clear that these confrontations were deliberate efforts to send a hostile message. It is crystal clear that Iran is showing the world, as it did in January with the capture, that the United States no longer runs the Gulf and is in fact afraid of Iran.

What has been the American response? What has the White House decided? To do nothing, and to tell the Navy to bob and weave and duck. The administration remains committed to its nuclear deal above all, and is willing to allow these dangerous and humiliating maneuvers against the Navy without reply. It is engaged in covering up

Iran's violations of the nuclear deal, denying them, and allowing secret exemptions. Meanwhile Iran increases its presence and activity in Iraq and Syria and uses the nuclear deal to build its economy.

It would be easy to show the Cuban regime, and the Cuban people, that we care more about freedom than Jet Blue; all that was required was a visit to Guillermo Farinas. Still, the administration won't do it, refusing to undermine its message that Cuba is changing and is our new friend. It is not so easy to show the world that we are not cowed by Iran and that our Navy will not be abused by the Iranian Navy; that will actually require sinking an Iranian vessel. But here again, the administration will not undermine its message that the nuclear deal will bring peace and moderation.

So it will be up to our next president to distinguish between friends and enemies. If he or she wants to send the world a message that the Obama era is over and America is back, visits to Cuban dissidents like Farinas and one sinking of an Iranian ship that is illegally and dangerously harassing a U.S. Navy vessel would be the best and likely the cheapest ways to do so.

Another Defense of Sisi Down the Drain

Blog Post *by* Elliott Abrams

August 31, 2016

Defenders of Egypt's President Sisi have long claimed that he was a protector of that country's beleaguered Christian minority. Roughly ten percent of Egyptians are Coptic Christians, and they suffer not only discrimination but repeated physical attacks (that the authorities do not fully investigate and do not punish). Moreover, for decades they have been refused permission to repair old churches or build new ones.

This week Egypt's parliament adopted a long-awaited new religion law, and it does nothing for the Copts and their churches. Here's a part of the Associated Press's story:

"Egypt's lawmakers on Tuesday passed the country's first law spelling out the rules for building a church, a step Christians have long hoped would free up construction that was often blocked by authorities. But angry critics in the community say the law will only enshrine the restrictions.

Church building has for decades been one of the most sensitive sectarian issues in Egypt, where 10 percent of the population of 90 million are Christians but where Muslim hardliners sharply oppose anything they see as undermining what they call the country's "Islamic character."
Under the law passed Tuesday, Christians must apply to the local provincial governor when they want to build a church.
The law stipulates that the size of the church must be "appropriate" to the number of Christians in the area. According to an official supplement to the law, the governor should also take into account "the preservation of security and public order" when considering the application.
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Preserving public order means avoiding anything radical Islamists oppose--such as a new church. Governors are likely to be former military or police officers and unsympathetic to the Copts's desires for new churches.

As one Egyptian analyst put it this week,

"There was hope that Sisi would anchor the principles of citizenship within the rule of law during his time in power. Indeed this is effectively what pushed [Coptic Pope] Tawadros II to call on Copts to support Sisi at home and abroad by every means

possible. But with every passing day, their faith in Sisi faded."

The new religion law ensures that that faith, and that hope, recede further. President Sisi is doing as little as he can for Egypt's Copts, and defenders of his rule must give up arguing that his treatment of this ancient community is actually a point in his favor.